

In 2014, the government frequently blocked access to online media outlets, social-networking websites, and other portals, and continued using restrictive media legislation and regulations to curb independent reporting. The ability of journalists to cover politically sensitive news was further constrained in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, located in eastern Tajikistan, in the wake of the high-profile arrest and detention of an academic researcher in the region's capital.

Legal Environment

Freedom of speech is guaranteed by the constitution, although authorities regularly curtail this freedom in practice. In 2013, the parliament of Tajikistan passed the law "On periodical print and other mass media," which took effect in March of that year. The law contains a number of protections for media workers, broadens the definition and rights of a journalist, attempts to limit the formation of media monopolies, and guarantees access to public information. The information provision strengthens Tajikistan's access to information law, which is poorly structured, little known by the public, and virtually ignored by officials. However, the new law's provisions for registration have already been used to shutter media outlets critical of the government's policies. The Culture Ministry withdrew the licenses of the independent weekly newspapers *Hafta* and *Paik* in February and April 2014, respectively, based on alleged technical violations of registration requirements. However, the revocations were perceived by media workers and watchdogs as retaliatory measures for the papers' publication of articles on sensitive social, economic, and governance issues in Tajikistan. In July 2014, authorities amended the Law on Emergency Situations, empowering the government to limit the use of video recording equipment and mobile and internet networks, and permitting authorities to censor mass media in order to "maintain peace."

A law decriminalizing libel was adopted in 2012, but journalists still face criminal penalties for insulting President Emomali Rahmon and other public officials. In February 2014, *Asia-Plus* editor Olga Tutubalina and the Asia-Plus Media Group were found guilty of collective libel in a Dushanbe civil court. Tutubalina had been charged with causing "physical and mental suffering" to the country's intelligentsia through a blog article she published in 2013. The media agency and she were fined 30,000 Tajikistani somoni (\$6,200) and required to publish an apology. The defendants in the case, who had not been identified in the blog post by name, included state-sponsored institutions.

Tajikistan's media licensing committee routinely denies licenses to independent and foreign media outlets or otherwise obstructs the licensing process. The government has repeatedly denied license renewal for radio broadcasting to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). No member of an independent media outlet has ever been included in the licensing committee, which retained its closed structure and nontransparent practices throughout 2014.

Political Environment

In 2013, Tajikistan adopted the "Ethics Code for an e-Citizen," which, although not legally enforceable, outlines a set of ethical guidelines for internet and telephone users. Some have deemed the code to be a way of justifying the blocking of websites that are critical of the government, noting that the document

requires respecting “the norms of the state language and national values in virtual space.” The authorities continued to periodically block access to independent social-networking and news websites in 2014. Throughout the year, internet service providers (ISPs) and mobile phone operators were instructed to block access to over 200 websites, including YouTube, Facebook, Google, Wikipedia, independent Tajik news portals, and popular Russian social-networking websites. While ISPs claimed that they received instructions from the Communications Service of the Tajik government to block websites, the agency has denied involvement and linked the outages on technical problems.

Investigative reporting has developed to some degree in Tajikistan, although ethical standards are not always respected. The law allows journalists to keep their sources confidential, except when ordered to disclose them by a court. However, officials often pressure journalists to reveal their sources of information, especially when concerning critical or analytical articles. This leads many journalists to publish their work under pseudonyms and to rely on anonymous sources.

Journalists reporting on sensitive issues face threats, attacks, libel suits, and other forms of harassment. Alexander Sodikov, a Tajik blogger and academic researcher affiliated with a Canadian university, was arrested in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region in June 2014 after conducting an interview with a local opposition leader. He was charged with espionage and high treason, and released into house arrest after 36 days in detention. In September, he was allowed to return to Canada, although the charges against him remained standing at the end of the year. While Sodikov was acting in the capacity of an academic researcher while conducting interviews in the region, his arrest had a chilling effect on the coverage of politically sensitive topics, particularly in the eastern part of the country. Tajik journalists claim that state-run media outlets often publicize letters from fabricated entities in which independent journalists and opposition figures are smeared.

Economic Environment

In a November 2014 speech, President Rahmon announced that there are 307 private and 209 state-owned publications, 49 private and 19 state-owned broadcasters, and dozens of private news agencies in Tajikistan; however, accurate figures are difficult to establish because of a lack of regular disclosure as well as frequent suspensions and closures. Most print publications are circulated on an irregular schedule, and are often issued only once or twice a month. The broadcast sector is dominated by state-controlled national television stations that praise Rahmon and deny coverage to independent or opposition points of view. Several regions in Tajikistan lack access to independent broadcasting. While analysts point out that there are few independent television stations in Tajikistan, international television broadcasts, including those from Russia, are becoming increasingly available through satellite services. However, electricity shortages limit overall access to electronic media, and government control over distribution limits the reach of print media. Internet use remains limited, and only 17 percent of the population accessed the medium in 2014. Widespread poverty, a small advertising market, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of political leaders and their associates hamper the emergence of financially robust and independent media outlets.